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ABSTRACT

University of Maryland full-time undergraduate students who were 36 to 57 years old were compared to a random sample of younger students aged 18 to 35 years old on the 1970 University Student Census, an attitude and activities inventory. The older sample of 319 students was 50 percent male and 50 percent female, while the younger sample of 313 students was 60 percent male and 40 percent female. Subjects were compared on 14 demographic items and 28 Likert-type attitude items. Older students tended to be married and live off-campus and studied more and had more clearly-fixed vocational goals than did younger students. Older students more often felt that the faculty and administration cared about students, that student disrupters should be suspended, and that Saturday classes were acceptable than did younger students. Older students were less in favor of coed housing or an abortion information service. Survey items and response data are included. (SW)

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1971

# CHARACTERISTICS OF OLDER UNDERGRADUATES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Ronald L. Kimball and William E. Sedlacek

Research Report # 7-71

*Abstract*

Despite growing numbers of older students attending colleges and universities, relatively little is known about this group. The purpose of this study was to compare older (36-57) undergraduates to their younger counterparts (18-35) on a number of demographic and attitudinal variables, using $\chi^2$ and $t$. Results indicated that older students tended to be married, live off-campus, study more, and to have more clearly fixed vocational goals. Older students also felt more that faculty and administration cared about students and that student disrupters should be suspended, and were more in favor of Saturday classes. Older students were less in favor of coed housing or an abortion information service. It was suggested that institutions should provide education and services for the diversity in their student bodies and that those in adult education could provide some expertise with students in full time programs.

There is evidence that an increasing number of undergraduates enrolled in colleges and universities are considerably older than the usual 18-22 year old range [Johnstone and Rivera (7), Brossman (3), Houle (6), and American Council on Education (1)] yet relatively little is known about this group of students. Work in this area indicates they have a number of distinct characteristics. Erickson (4) notes, for instance, that most older students are middle class, from rural and semi-rural areas, and generally are themselves the children of non-college attending parents. She also found that more males than females are returning to college, but that the females who did were generally older and either married, divorced or widowed. Both sexes tended to be content with their present jobs outside of the college community.

The largest volume of work concerned with older undergraduates was done in the years 1946-49. A number of studies concerned Armed Forces veterans as college students. The balance of such research was devoted to the academic progress of veterans [Taylor (9), Thompson and Flesher (10), Tibbitts and Hunter (11)]. In all of the cited studies it was found that veterans were doing at least as well as civilian undergraduates, although some studies found that an adjustment period was necessary (Tibbitts and Hunter, 11). Moore (8) discovered three general problems contributing to the adjustment difficulty of veterans. Many seemed to lack a specific occupational aim; they seemed to have a stronger than usual dislike of the faculty; and, after the constant work in the Armed Forces, they found any spare time tedious. Moore noted that marriage seemed to make no difference as to whether or not these problems were present. He also found that in general, the veterans were somewhat more "liberal" in their political views than were their civilian counterparts. With the recent turmoil on U.S. campuses it would be interesting to see just how the attitudes of current older undergraduates compare with their younger counterparts. The

purpose of this study was to provide such comparative data for students in a large university.

*Procedure*

Subjects were all the fulltime undergraduate students at the University of Maryland, College Park who were 36 years old or more ($N$=319, age range =36-57) who had completed the University Student Census (USC) in the fall of 1970. The USC is an attitude and activities inventory and was completed by 96% (17,144) of all full time undergraduates. New freshmen unfamiliar with the campus were not included in the study. A random sample of 313 younger students (age range =18-35) was selected for a comparison group. The older sample was 50% male and 50% female, compared to 60% male and 40% female in the younger group. Subjects were compared on fourteen demographic items and 28 Likert type attitude items. Differences between groups were tested using chi-square and $t$ at the .05 level.

*Results*

Demographic Items: Compared to younger students, older students were: more likely to be married (32% vs. 12%), more likely to be transfer students (39% vs. 23%) and more likely to have parents who didn't finish high school (27% vs. 14%). Additionally, older students were more likely to have clearly fixed vocational goals (22% vs. 10%) and they studied more. Thirty-two percent of the older group studied 30 or more hours per week compared to 6% of the younger group. Older students were less likely to live on campus (18% vs. 38%) and were less likely to come to the University because it was inexpensive (19% vs. 27%). All differences were significant at the .05 level using chi-square.

Attitude Items: Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the 28 attitude items.

*Discussion*

Demographically, the older students appear much as expected, tending to be married, living off campus, studying more, and being more vocationally oriented than the younger students.

Attitudinally, the older group differs considerably from their younger classmates. Compared to younger students, older students tended to feel more that faculty and administration care for students (items 20,21,22), that students have channels for expressing complaints and participation in policy-making (items 25 and 23), that students should not have a vote in hiring and promotion of faculty (item 3), and that the University should suspend disrupters (item 24). Older students felt more that graduate and undergraduate teaching receive equal priority (item 13), and were more in favor of Saturday classes (item 16), but more against dropping courses throughout a semester without penalty (item 6). Older students were more against coed housing (item 28) and a contraception and abortion information service (item 7). Older students were also more likely to feel their courses were exciting (item 18) and that most black students are friendly to whites (item 17). The results clearly indicate that the older students in this study are considerably different in their attitudes and orientations than many of the studies on veterans (e.g., Moore,8) done after World War II. Today's older undergraduates are not unsure of their vocational goals and appear more conservative than younger students. The goal directed orientation and motivation of older students is further demonstrated by their interest in Saturday classes, the amount of studying they do, that low educational costs are relatively unimportant, and that they tend to be excited by coursework. The conservatism on campus issues they express is largely predictable, based on their ages. Several studies have shown that older people tend to be more conservative . The American Institute of Public Opinion (2) has reported

71% of Americans over 30 consider themselves either conservative or middle of the road compared to 62% of Americans between 21 and 29. Herman and Sedlacek (5) found that 86% of people in the 41-50 age group labeled themselves conservative or moderate, compared to 62% among those aged 21-30.

The question may be asked, of what educational significance are the data from this study? One important consideration is providing information that all undergraduates are not alike, and that there are older undergraduates with goals and attitudes different from their younger counterparts. As an institution plans its programs and services it should consider all its students and not just gear itself toward providing for its largest groups. At a large institution it is particularly easy to forget the diversity in a student body. For instance, if the University were to provide Saturday classes it might make a big difference to many of the older students, as they have indicated in this study. Similarly, those in the field of adult education are reminded that not all older students attend school at night or in special programs. Providing some expertise and input into the regular university programs might be beneficial to all concerned with higher education.

A number of further studies on older undergraduates are suggested by the results of the present study. Research on the specific needs and problems of older students should prove fruitful. For instance, aside from Saturday classes, what other administrative changes might prove useful; more night classes? certain courses offered at certain times? etc. Student services might be explored also; for instance, the counseling needs of such students may be different since their goals are clearer; or are they having particular adjustment problems? Also, the need for services such as day care facilities for children, or social facilities or functions for older students could be explored.

Another research question worth further exploration is the tendency for older students to respond relatively positively to all items, regardless of content; to be less critical of the school or anyone else. This may be simply because they are older but there may be other conclusions and implications possible through further study.

In short, it appears older undergraduates have different values and orientations toward a number of educational and campus issues. A consideration and reflection of these in educational planning, research and teaching appears worthwhile.

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Table 1.

Means and Standard Deviations for Younger and Older Students for 28 Attitude Items*

| Item # | | Older Students (N=319) Mean | Older Students (N=319) S.D. | Younger Students (N=313) Mean | Younger Students (N=313) S.D. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3.** | Students should have a vote in the hiring, retention and promotion of faculty in their academic departments, | 1.82 | 1.32 | 1.54 | 1.33 |
| 4, | Each academic department should establish a Student Advisory Board. | 1.01 | 0.98 | 0.95 | 1.09 |
| 5. | The disruptions of last spring made me more involved in issues on the campus. | 1.75 | 1.25 | 1.69 | 1.42 |
| 6.** | Academic regulations should allow dropping courses throughout a semester without penalty. | 1.58 | 1.33 | 1.40 | 1.38 |
| 7.** | The University's Health Service should provide students with such services as information and prescriptions regarding contraception and abortion. | 1.26 | 0.14 | 0.98 | 1.30 |
| 8. | The University should have an after-business hours telephone service center for crises and general help to students. | 0.79 | 0.90 | 0.73 | 1.20 |
| 9. | The University should provide a legal counseling service for students. | 1.11 | 1.12 | 1.02 | 1.17 |
| 10. | The University should provide a drug counseling service for students. | 0.73 | 1.06 | 0.77 | 1.06 |
| 11. | To enable concerned students and others to engage in political activity, the University should arrange its schedule to provide for no classes during the week before the November elections. | 1.97 | 1.37 | 1.87 | 1.44 |

Table 1 Continued

Means and Standard Deviations for Younger and Older Students for 28 Attitude Items*

| | Item # | Older Students (N=319) Mean | S.D. | Younger Students (N=313) Mean | S.D. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12. | Freshman and sophomore courses are not given enough attention by a number of academic departments. | 1.41 | 1.01 | 1.46 | 1.20 |
| 13.** | Graduate teaching, advisement and research occupy equal priority with undergraduate teaching involvement in most departments. | 1.96 | 0.98 | 2.16 | 1.28 |
| 14. | The idea of the campus colloquy conducted last spring should be repeated regularly as a means of improving campus communication and problem solving. | 1.32 | 1.01 | 1.33 | 1.20 |
| 15. | This campus needs some good leadership to encourage students, faculty, and administrators to work jointly at improving the University. | 0.89 | 0.92 | 0.93 | 1.17 |
| 16.** | The University should schedule more classes on Saturdays. | 2.35 | 1.30 | 2.83 | 1.33 |
| 17.** | Most black students are friendly to whites. | 1.69 | 0.96 | 2.03 | 1.28 |
| 18.** | Most of my classes are stimulating and exciting. | 2.01 | 1.08 | 2.35 | 1.20 |
| 19. | The University should actively recruit black students. | 2.05 | 1.20 | 2.17 | 1.41 |
| 20.** | Most faculty advisors here act like they really care about students. | 1.84 | 1.16 | 2.10 | 1.28 |
| 21.** | Most teaching faculty here act like they really care about students. | 1.75 | 1.12 | 1.94 | 1.26 |

Table 1 Continued

Means and Standard Deviations for Younger and Older Students for 28 Attitude Items*

| | Item # | Older Students (N=319) Mean | S.D. | Younger Students (N=313) Mean | S.D. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 22.** | Most administrators here act like they really care about students. | 2.26 | 1.14 | 2.55 | 1.23 |
| 23.** | University students have ample opportunity to participate in University policy making. | 2.39 | 1.05 | 2.56 | 1.20 |
| 24.** | The University should suspend students who disrupt the normal operation of the University. | 1.46 | 1.36 | 2.03 | 1.50 |
| 25.** | Channels for expressing student complaints are readily available. | 2.24 | 1.12 | 2.53 | 1.24 |
| 26. | More use should be made of student and faculty referendums as providing bases for important administrative decision-making within the University. | 1.22 | 1.08 | 1.23 | 1.20 |
| 27. | The University should schedule more classes in the late afternoon and evening hours. | 1.97 | 1.86 | 2.14 | 1.21 |
| 28.** | I believe that the introduction of coed housing on campus was an educationally sound idea. | 1.54 | 1.10 | 1.15 | 1.17 |
| 29. | Most U. of Md. students are concerned about social issues on and off this campus. | 1.54 | 1.01 | 1.64 | 1.23 |
| 30. | The U. of Md. is a better University than it was a year ago. | 1.69 | 1.00 | 1.75 | 1.30 |

* (0=Strongly Agree; 4=Strongly Disagree)
** Significant beyond the .05 level using *t*